

COMMENDATION FOR PETER OLIVER MJOS, MEDICAL DOCTOR

For the Saint Olaf College Outstanding Service Award:

Distinguished and meritorious volunteer service to community and the college.

This commendation by The Reverend Doctor John Rolf Reigstad, ELCA.

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. Luke 12:48 NRSV.

Part I.

Peter Oliver Mjos, physician and conservationist, most surely deserves the Saint Olaf College Outstanding Service Award. One could write in detail about Peter's long professional and volunteer work with the United States Indian Health Service in Alaska, beginning in 1973. That record alone qualifies him for the award.

And yet the most outstanding testimony to Peter's volunteer spirit comes through his activist ethics of natural conservancy, his lasting love for the beauty and resources of Alaska and the planet Earth. Keeping in mind that the State of Alaska is nearly 20% of the geographic area of the United States, and nearly 8 times the area of Minnesota, Dr. Mjos has served:

- as President of the Tongass Conservation Foundation, the largest environmental nonprofit agency in the Americas (according to *Forbes* magazine), dedicated to preserving healthy ecosystems in Southeastern Alaska and the United States.
- as past president of the Anchorage, Alaska Citizen's Coalition.
- as past president of the Rogers Park, Alaska, Community Council.
- on the Board of the Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club, promoting bright green environmentalism and a vast array of ecological causes across the United States.
- on the Board of the Junior Nordic League (JNL) for 10 years, five president, during which JNL developed the largest youth cross country ski training program in the United States. Dr. Mjos has inspired many of Alaska's families to a lifelong love of fitness and cross country skiing.
- on various teams dedicated to expanding Alaskan ski trails.
- as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Nature Conservancy of Alaska, whose stated mission is "providing legal support to protect and sustain Alaska's natural environment".
- a member of the Board of Directors of Cook Inletkeeper, whose goal is
*promoting sound public policies that protect fish habitat and water
 quality; holding individuals, industry, and agencies accountable
 for habitat, water quality and human health. . . .*
- in multiple programs designed to combat youth obesity and create healthy lifestyles for children, including the Michelle Obama *Let's Move!* program for youth fitness and nutrition awareness.
- in defending for many years the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and its designated Wilderness. On the tip of the Alaskan peninsula, Izembek was finally protected by an act of Congress in 1980. Izembek is home for an astonishing array of precious wildlife, including a quarter-million migratory birds landing every fall; the entire world's population of the black brant subspecies of goose; thousands of Canada and emperor geese; sea otters, whales, ducks, swans, salmon, black bear, herds of caribou, and one of the largest eelgrass beds in the world, providing food for the countless birds every year. All this is surrounded by

dramatic, smoking volcanoes and glaciated mountains towering over the pristine Izembek wilderness. Dr. Mjos is to be commended for his long-standing dedication to protecting the Izembek treasures.

- as a member of the Board of Directors of Trustees for Alaska (TFA), Alaska's Nonprofit Public Interest Environmental Law Firm, whose stated mission is "to provide legal counsel to protect and sustain Alaska's natural environment". TFA is committed "to shape Alaska's environmental future—oil and gas development, mining, toxic wastes, air and water pollution, public land use, and protection of marine resources." TFA launches this warning on its website:

... Alaska is being threatened by the destructive trend of unconscious development. We face an onslaught of efforts to circumvent the public process and force through plans that would enrich a few while forever destroying the Alaskan way of life. The consequences of failing to protect our last few wild places are huge. Our government must follow its own rules, treating everyone equally in the public process. As we have seen, this won't happen without vigilant oversight. ... While our successes have set significant legal precedent in environmental law on state and national levels, the primary focus of our work is to benefit Alaska's environment and human communities. Most recently, we have focused on global warming, which is already devastating Alaska's environment—particularly its fragile Arctic and subarctic ecosystems—and to which, ironically, Alaska is poised to make an outsized and self-destructive contribution in the form of massive coal developments. ... We will continue to develop the staff, resources, expertise and trust to join forces. . . throughout Alaska's vast reaches in support of clean air, spectacular wilderness, and Native cultures. Our strength comes from our supporters, board and staff's passion to protect the magnificent places and people of Alaska, and our commitment to working with rural Native communities.

The Trustees for Alaska warning is underscored by the new Global Analysis published online in October 2016 by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The first nine months of 2016 were extremely warm,

... resulting in the warmest January-September period in the 137-year record. . . . This value exceeded the previous record set in 2015. . . . Much-warmer-than-average conditions engulfed the vast majority of the world's land surfaces during the January-September period, . . . besting the previous [global] record set in 2015. . . . According to the Global Regional analysis by the National Centers for Environmental Information [NCEI], all six continents had at least a top three warm January-September period, with North America and Asia each observing a record high average temperature for January-September since continental records began in 1910. No land areas experienced cooler-than-average conditions during January-September 2016. . . . The average global sea surface temperature for the year-to-date was the highest for January-September in the 137-year period of record.

Obviously we are in the midst of a global climate crisis. I hope that Saint Olaf College, by awarding Dr. Peter Mjos the Outstanding Service Award, will at the same time be making a strong ethical

statement about humanity's need to study climate extremes and the existential threat of global warming.

Many other volunteer activities span Peter's life, punctuated by daily reverence for the whole creation and for the natural glory of Alaska, which some would call our most pristine, beautiful, and majestic state—and perhaps our *last* pristine state.

Again it would be a mistake to think of Peter's conservancy as restricted only to the State of Alaska, because the State of Alaska has served as the national leader for conservancy across the entire United States. Article VIII of the Alaska Constitution, protecting the state's natural beauty and resources, was the first state constitution article in the United States to deal solely with natural conservancy. Article VIII became effective when the Alaska Statehood Proclamation was signed on January 3, 1959. Since then, Alaska has remained at the vanguard of conservancy ethics in the United States and planet Earth. Dr. Mjos stands as a national leader in conservancy by virtue of his leadership in the State of Alaska. I know that Peter takes inspiration from the great tradition of American conservation pioneers such as John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry David Thoreau, and George Bird Grinnell.

Part II

Now I want to focus not only on Peter's many conservation projects and his many acts of volunteer leadership since he graduated from Saint Olaf 50 years ago. I also want to reveal the roots of his naturalism and his service—all grounded in his childhood long before his years as a Saint Olaf student. This will show that his volunteer service is not just an ethical alliance with the conservancy movement over the past several decades. Aristotle would be pleased with Peter's *lifelong character* and dedication to the care of the Earth.

Many years ago I learned about the early inklings of Peter's exceptional volunteer service. He reminisced with me his love of scouting as a little boy. He achieved the highest rank of Eagle Scout, a testimony to his depth of character, his persevering for the common good, and his pragmatic skills. Very few achieve that supreme scouting rank. Pete's progress toward Eagle Scout was a process of savvy volunteering, a microcosm of his entire life as a compassionate caregiver and a skilled, thoughtful naturalist. His Eagle Scout merit badge training helped in many ways to formulate Peter's ethics of conservancy—his merit badges such as the Soil and Water Conservation Merit Badge, the Care of Nature Badge, as well as the badges for Geology, Weather and Climate, Forestry, Fishing, Gardening, Camping, Pioneering, Hiking, Surveying, Native American Lore, First Aid, Lifesaving and Emergency Preparedness, Personal Fitness, Public Health, Safety, Scholarship, Electricity, and Chemistry. Fortunately, in the year 1952 the Boy Scouts terminated the merit badge for Stalking—and renamed it Wildlife Tracking. Overall, Peter's nature merit badges set the first foundation for his service to life on Earth, 60+ years before this nomination for the Saint Olaf Outstanding Service Award.

Throughout his childhood, Peter's late parents Paul and Ruth, his brother David, and his sister Julie all contributed tremendously to Peter's personality, and surely they all benefited as well from Peter's maturing compassion, his doing—and his being.

The challenge of human sickness and death has always strongly motivated Peter. When he suffered a long-term illness as a child, a physician neighbor visited Peter regularly and inspired Pete to a career of caring for others—and so his life as a physician and compassionate steward was born.

Part III.

In the fall of 1964, Peter and I lived next door to each other in our freshman year at Saint Olaf. Immediately Peter's expressed his volunteer spirit to me. At Thanksgiving break, when Peter heard that I was far away from home, he invited me to his home in Willmar, Minnesota. There I found that Peter was not only a great friend, but that he also grounded himself in wise emotions and honorable ethical character—often caring about others before he cared about himself. This has been a hallmark of his life as a volunteer.

Peter and I became close roommates in our junior and senior years at Saint Olaf. In our junior year, 1966-67, we served as volunteer dormitory counselors for freshman on the top floor of the venerable—and creaky!—55-year-old Ytterboe Hall. We *loved* Ytterboe! It was in a rustic class by itself, along with campus buildings such as Mellby Hall, Old Main, and Thorson Hall. If you lived on campus in the 1960's or earlier, you know what I mean. Peter served as a great friend and a mentor to all the men of Ytterboe.

Peter's father died tragically in an accident while we were seniors at Saint Olaf, and that sealed our personal bond together, as my own father had also died tragically in an accident when I was 9 years old. I think those experiences helped both of us appreciate the challenge of post-traumatic stress.

Peter and I spent his first year in medical school and my first year in post-graduate philosophy while we lived in the same dormitory—the *Nu Sigma Nu* medical fraternity house at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Peter studied medicine like mad—but he always found a sliver of time every week to live it up with his medical comrades. His therapeutic sense of humor has never faded, despite the pressures of pre-med studies or the rigors of medical practice.

Peter's mission in life as a wise, compassionate man was thus founded. It reminds me of the parable, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock" (Matthew 7:24 NRSV). The name "Peter" means "rock" in New Testament Greek. I believe that Peter's life has been built on the rock that is the wisdom of God. In fact, Peter told me privately many years ago that if medical school did not work out, then he wanted to consider the Lutheran ministry. In both careers, caring for others is a central core—and Peter has that caring core as deep as his very soul.

Peter also knew how to say no. I remember that soon after Pete graduated from medical school, he turned to me and said, "Flame—that was his nickname for me—when I start practicing medicine, I will not be able to treat you." I asked why, and he replied, "I can not treat you because I don't want to disappoint you." I took it as a compliment because he was treating me like family.

After medical school at the U of M, Peter made a total commitment to medical mission in Alaska, to the glory of the Alaska wilderness, to global ecology, and to the care for the indigenous communities of Alaska. He stretched himself beyond his Scandinavian roots in Caucasian Minnesota. He exuded the truth that we are defined not only by what we do, but also by where we work and *who we are*. I've always believed that Peter has made his greatest statement as a person the way Socrates did— not only by doing, but also by *being*. Hence my claim that his greatest personal trait is a spiritual gift, the giving of himself. Many times Peter has taught a personal lesson, not only by speech or behavior, but also through a timely presence, a simple being of grace and wisdom that communicates—and communes—even through silence.

After he settled in Alaska, Dr. Mjos flew me to Anchorage for his wedding to the lovely Karen. The wedding took place in the serene village of Hope. Whenever I sing the *All Day Hymn*, I remember it as the beautiful wedding song of Karen and Peter. It's a wonderful feeling.

Years later for their 25th anniversary, Pete and Karen flew me and my son to Alaska again. Peter's gracious generosity can be humbling as well as inspiring. The night of the 25th anniversary dinner party for Karen and Pete, we gorged ourselves with fresh salmon and all the trimmings. The night was shining with a golden aura around the long table. We had to squeeze everybody in. And after we all had our fill of storytelling, repartee, zingers, and belly-laughs, I stood to make a final toast to Peter, his bride Karen, and all the guests. I raised my glass of *aquavit*, surveyed the group, and proclaimed, "If you want to feel better fast, then lower your standards! *Skal!*" We all cracked up. Then, as the laughter died down, Peter stood up, raised his glass even higher, and said, "If you want to feel better fast—then lower your pants." It brought down the house. (*In case you missed the joke, don't forget that many of us when sick have actually come to the doctor's office and lowered our pants in order to feel better.*) True to form, Peter cracked only a wry smile on the best punch line of the night. Once again, Peter had one-upped me. I can't remember a jollier night in all my life. The smiles were big, the cheeks were rosy, and the eyes were glistening.

Part IV.

Years later, Peter and his sister Julie flew me to Bainbridge Island, Washington state, for the memorial service of his beloved brother-in-law, Scott MacGregor, a dear young man and husband of Julie. It was a day profound and still. There were mixed feelings—from deep sadness to a joyous celebration of Scott's wonderful life. At the memorial service, Peter gave Scott's eulogy—some of the most comforting and awe-inspiring words I've ever heard. Thus Peter's volunteer spirit has included his gifts of word and comfort—and the silence between the words—his love of great poetry and scripture and hymnody, as he yet brings his ministry of wisdom to others.

In closing these thoughts, I would summarize that Peter Oliver Mjos has expressed a lifetime of volunteer service—in learning and teaching, in caring, in giving, in healing, in mentoring, and in stewardship of the Earth. Peter seldom leads by coercion; he always leads by example. He's easy to follow and easy to love.

Lest we forget, Dr. Mjos has also served as a volunteer physician for the Winter Olympics, and he has expressed his love for Saint Olaf College many times over.

I have seen in Peter Mjos a sage—essentially a simple and gifted man whose inherent nature has been to care and to volunteer, beginning as an ethically precocious child. As long as I have known him, I have known his spirit of outstanding volunteer service, both socially and personally. I will always remember him with admiration and with love, therefore I

*. . . declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard,
what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched
with our hands. . . —this life was revealed, and we have seen it and
testify to it. . . . I am writing these words so that your joy may be complete.*

(1 John 1:1-2a, 4)

This Commendation was offered by The Reverend Doctor John Rolf Reigstad.

Pastor

Resurrection Lutheran Church (ELCA)

4112 West Florissant Avenue

Saint Louis, Missouri MO 63115

revreigstad@gmail.com

(314) 401-7993 text/call

Adjunct Professor of Philosophy and World Religions

Saint Louis University

1 North Grand Boulevard

Saint Louis Missouri 63103

Jreigsta@slu.edu

Current member and former governing board member of the Men's Health Club of
The Jewish Community Center of Saint Louis

2 Millstone Campus Drive

Saint Louis, Missouri 63146

Home:

New 10 Millstone Campus Drive

Suite 402

Saint Louis, Missouri 63146

(314) 401-7993 text or call

revreigstad@gmail.com